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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEGUCIGALPA 000090

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SUBJECT: SOUTHCOM COMMANDER'S HONDURAS VISIT REINFORCES
ARMED FORCES ROLE AS DEFENDER OF DEMOCRACY AND SECURITY

REF: A. TEGUCIGALPA 56

[B](#). TEGUCIGALPA 64

[C](#). TEGUCIGALPA 50

Classified By: Ambassador Hugo Llorens, reasons 1.4 (b & d)

[1](#). (U) SUMMARY: Taking place on the heels of a near constitutional crisis over the election of the Supreme Court (Ref A), the visit of SOUTHCOM Commander Admiral James Stavridis on January 29-30 could not have been better timed to reinforce our message of democracy and civilian control of the military. The visit was productive, providing Admiral Stavridis with an opportunity to hear the latest on bilateral initiatives and deliver a clear message that the USG lauds civilian control of the military and the evolution of the Honduran Armed Forces (HOAF) as a defender of constitutional order. The capture of an aircraft laden with over 1,500 kilos of cocaine by a Honduran joint military-police operation the day before the visit (Ref B) provided the perfect backdrop for another key point of the visit -- the value of regional cooperation in the fight against drug trafficking. End summary.

[2](#). (U) In his visit to Honduras, Admiral Stavridis received a country team briefing on the state of bilateral affairs; had lunch at the Ambassador's residence with the senior political leadership, both current and past, as well as key business leaders; met with President Zelaya and his new Foreign Minister-designate Patricia Rodas (all new cabinet designates took office effective February 1); held an interview with a local journalist; and attended a dinner with the outbound Minister of Defense, the new Minister-designate, and the top military brass. The visit was an opportunity to brief Stavridis on bilateral and regional issues, including Merida Initiative progress, CAFTA implementation, public-private partnership initiatives and U.S. development programs under USAID, MCC and Pathways to Prosperity. Admiral Stavridis delivered strong messages on military-to-military relations, the joint battle against illicit drugs, and humanitarian relief. In all the events of the day, the underlying message was that the HOAF had transformed itself into a positive force for democracy and civilian rule.

[3](#). (C) The Ambassador hosted a lunch for Admiral Stavridis attended by the two major party presidential candidates, Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo of the National Party and Elvin Santos

of the Liberal Party. Also present were former President Carlos Flores, National Party patriarch Manuel Acosta Bonilla, Tegucigalpa Mayor Ricardo Alvarez and private sector leaders. Both presidential candidates stressed their support for the Constitution and the political process. They briefed the Admiral on the election process and events of the previous weekend. Lobo noted that the threats made by members of the Zelaya administration regarding selection of Supreme Court magistrates were a genuine threat to democracy, and he hoped the HOAF would not be used to interfere with the political process. Flores asserted that the parties should never take democracy for granted, and that the weekend had been a wake-up call to be more vigilant. He also acknowledged the coordinating role played by the Ambassador and Embassy officers in averting a crisis.

¶4. (C) The business leaders explained the impact of the U.S. and global financial crisis on Honduras, primarily on remittances, lower expected growth and higher unemployment. The business leaders criticized the Zelaya administration for poor management of economic policy and for adopting "destabilizing" measures such as the 60 percent minimum wage increase during a global recession. All present agreed that because of weak economic policy, whatever administration takes office in 2010 will face serious challenges with regard to economic stabilization. The Ambassador noted that it was important to continue engaging the current administration in order to encourage them to make prudent economic decisions; on the economic front, that included renewing the IMF standby agreement.

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¶5. (C) President Zelaya met with Stavridis and the Ambassador at the presidential palace. For the first part of the meeting, Foreign Minister Rodas participated as well. The meeting was positive, with a cordial tone. Zelaya focused on the good state of bilateral relations, highlighting his appreciation for the long-standing history of friendship between the U.S. and Honduras and pointing to the present level of cooperation on many key issues. The Ambassador noted that the bilateral Merida task force had been launched, and that the first meeting of the recently created bilateral Merida Task Force was positive and productive (Ref C). Stavridis then briefed Zelaya on the successful January 28 cocaine and aircraft seizure, noting it was a "textbook case" of detection, coordination and response involving the USG, Colombia, Guatemala, Mexico and Honduras. The Admiral stressed to Zelaya that the most important message of his visit was that the state of bilateral mil-mil relations was exceptionally good, and he was proud of the progress the HOAF had made over the past years to become a more professional force supportive of civilian democratic rule.

¶6. (U) The Admiral's one-on-one interview with a reporter from La Tribuna received prominent, positive coverage in that paper's weekend magazine. The resulting article focused on common concerns, such as the threat of trafficking, transnational crime and the need for poverty reduction. The article also gave the Admiral a public forum to stress his key messages of bilateral friendship and cooperation.

¶7. (C) The Ambassador hosted a dinner for the Admiral and the Honduran military leadership that evening. The outgoing Defense Minister (and acting Vice President) Aristides Mejia, the Minister-designate (and outgoing Foreign Minister) Edmundo Orellana, the Chief of Defense (CHOD) GEN Romeo Vasquez and the three service chiefs attended the event, which gave Stavridis an opportunity to directly praise the transformation of the HOAF over the past years and highlight the importance of the HOAF role as defender of the constitutional order. The Ambassador noted the change he had witnessed in the HOAF from his previous assignment to Honduras 16 years ago, when the public saw the HOAF as part of the problem and associated the military with repression and corruption. He said the military had come very far in

transforming itself into a highly professional and capable force supportive of democratic rule. The result was that the Honduran people admired and respected the HOAF and saw the military as very much part of the solution. The transformation took place over many years, and through great political effort, he said. Orellana spoke eloquently about the HOAF's role as the defender of democracy. Stavridis also praised the transformation of the HOAF and its role today as defender of democracy. He reiterated the USG and U.S. military commitment to working closely with the GOH and the HOAF in this regard.

18. (C) Comment: Admiral Stavridis, visit was extremely productive and timely. For example, coming on the heels of the political crisis of the previous weekend, which included threats made by outgoing Defense Minister Mejia (who attended the dinner) to use military force if Congress did not accept the GOH's position on the Supreme Court, it gave us an opportunity to strengthen our ties with the HOAF and reinforce the positive message that our two militaries are supportive of constitutional rule. Furthermore, the successful seizure of an aircraft carrying over 1,500 kilos of cocaine by Honduran police and military forces in an operation that involved coordination with U.S. military and law enforcement assets only a day before the Admiral's visit allowed Stavridis to highlight the importance of our ties and cooperation. End comment.

19. (U) This cable was cleared by Admiral Stavridis.
LLORENS